

George F. Will

Another Bluff

In his first response, weeks ago, to what he now dismissively calls "the highly publicized" Soviet combat brigade in Cuba, Jimmy Carter went on national television in the afternoon. He warned the Soviets that the status quo was "unacceptable."

But many people have been schooled in skepticism by his record of unreciprocated concessions in defense policy and unmet challenges in geopolitics. Such people tried to imagine what microscopic change by the Soviets would satisfy Carter's criterion of an acceptable change in the status quo.

No skeptic was skeptical enough. No one anticipated that Carter would take prime television time to announce that "the highest levels of the Soviet government" have given him "assurances" that they intend to maintain the status quo. All he could say was this:

Although "persuasive evidence" shows that the Soviets are lying when they assert that the brigade has a non-combat nature, Soviet statements about the future non-combat nature are "significant." The Soviets say they will not change the brigade's "function or status," and we "understand this to mean" they will not enlarge or alter the brigade.

That is, because the Soviets insist they will not change the status quo that Carter has called "unacceptable," he infers that they will not do anything to make it more unacceptable, and so it is acceptable.

Recognize this? Carter's response is similar to, but even weaker than, his response to the Soviet Backfire bomber.

Backfire is, unquestionably, a strategic weapon, capable of a nuclear attack over intercontinental distances. But the Soviets blandly deny this (just as they deny the brigade's combat capability). So Carter has acquiesced in the Soviets' demand that Backfire not count against their SALT totals. In exchange, the Soviets have promised that they will produce Backfires at about the rate they have been producing them and that they will not give Backfire the strategic capability we know it has.

Having stressed that the brigade, by itself, constitutes no military threat, Carter is deploying forces in a way that would only make sense as a response to a military threat. Having decided on a purely symbolic response, rather than one that would

inconvenience the Soviets, he has symbolized the floundering of the United States, just as he did when he sent an aircraft carrier steaming in circles in the South China Sea and sent fighter planes to Saudi Arabia, unarmed. To the Soviets, the significant fact about Carter's response is that he declines to mention the possibility of considering even mild new restrictions on the eastward flow of grain, technology and credit.

According to Carter, the principal threat Americans should worry about is not Soviet adventurism, of which the militarization of Cuba is just one facet. No, the threat is . . . the U.S. Senate, which does not show proper enthusiasm for the SALT II deal he struck with the Soviets. To the men in the Kremlin, it now is obvious that if they add to their nuclear-capable aircraft in Cuba, to their submarines and to their ground combat forces, Carter's response probably will be a televised warning to Americans about the dangerous buildup of bad vibrations in the Senate chamber.

If anyone had any doubt, this episode should have erased it: nothing the Soviets could do would cause Carter to question the wisdom of proceeding with SALT II. Indeed, SALT II had better be brought to a vote before Carter, who now says it is the key to "the survival of the human race," exhausts the English language's store of hyperbole.

By all means: let's vote.

Since July, the administration has skillfully—too skillfully for its own good—manufactured a sense of inevitability. It has conveyed the impression that the debate is over and won and that ratification will be perfunctory. But the problem with skillful propaganda is that the propagandizers begin to believe it. Administration vote-counts have been studies in wishful thinking.

Sen. Frank Church, who somersaults around the political landscape with the airy lightness of a jolly jester not weighed down by worries about appearances, originally said SALT II should be shelved until the combat brigade is eliminated. Now that Carter says the brigade will neither leave nor change, Church wants to proceed with the ratification process.

So do many opponents of SALT II. Although the administration says it has the votes, many opponents know, as the Soviets know, how safe it is to call this administration's bluff.